
Hellas: Dialect and School

Eliza Kitis, Aristotle University

What characterises a language is its diversity rather than its homogeneity. The Greek language is no exception to this rule. However, the main characteristic of the Greek speech community up till very recently has been its diglossic situation. Charles Ferguson (1959) was the first to introduce the term "diglossia" which he defined as follows:

DIGLOSSIA is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period

or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation. (244/45)

The roots of diglossia in Greece go back to the Alexandrian period when Hellenistic scholars were at great pains to restore the language of the Classical Age. Their approach to language, which has been called "atticism", was motivated by their belief that the colloquial speech of their own time was "corrupt". This attitude persisted right through the Byzantine era to take shape in the evolution of *katharevousa*

late in the 19th century, the variety based on Classical Greek, and regarded as the official language of the newly founded state.

What is Modern Greek?

The 20th century is called the period of demoticism (Triandafyllidis 1938) because it is characterised by new linguistic ideals incarnated in the form of *demotiki*, the variety of Greek based on the spoken language of the Greek people. However, *katharevousa* was the language formally taught at school until very recently (1976), when *demotiki* was declared the official language of the State. Before 1976 schoolchildren were not exposed to any kind of formal instruction in their native language.

Following the introduction of

demotiki as the official language, there has been a rather protracted debate amongst linguists and scholars concerning the determination of what exactly constitutes Modern Greek (KNE: *Koine Neo-Elleniki*, or Modern Greek Common Language) as the prevailing variety of demotiki is now called.

Before 1976 a mixed variety of Greek, *mikti*, was widely used as a compromise between katharevousa and demotiki and helped to resolve communicative tensions which typically arise in diglossic situations (Ferguson 1959). In this mixed variety lexical items as well as morphological forms were borrowed from katharevousa; and their traces are still evident in Modern Greek speech, although *mikti* was used mainly as the written language.

Dialects

The Greek language does not form any part of the European dialect continuum; it might be claimed that when we speak of the Greek language, we use "language" as a technical, linguistically rather than just politically defined term. Apart from a very small percentage of the population — 7.5% according to Miravel (1959), or 5% according to Triandafyllidis (1938) — who speak varieties which are not considered to belong to the Greek language (Turkish, Slavic, Albanian, etc.), it could be said that Greeks speak a more or less homogeneous language — if one regards mutual intelligibility as the main criterion for differentiating dialects of a *common* language. However, if the criterion of mutual intelligibility as the decisive factor, not only for the delimitation of languages, but also for distinguishing varieties of a *common* language is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition, we cannot rely on the assumption that the Greek language is homogeneous, i.e. on what has been called the fiction of homogeneity (Lyons 1981), either in our linguistic research or in matters of educational policy.

It is worth keeping in mind when

talking of dialects that "dialects and accents frequently merge into one another without any discrete break" (Chambers and Trudgill 1980: 5). This is particularly true of the linguistic varieties in Greece. The poet Solomos wrote in 1842, in connection with the question of dialectal variation that existed in his time:

How many dialects are there? How many? Make sure that you are not misled by the different accents in delimiting the dialects of Greece. What does it matter if we have ten words different from the words in Moreas. So what are these great differences? We say *pat-eró* and elsewhere they say *pátero*, we say *matía* and elsewhere they say *matía*, we say *aéras* and elsewhere they say *ajéras*...

and he went on to say:

I had alien servants from various regions, one from Mani, and I could understand him perfectly well; one from Gastouni, one from Olympus, one from the island of Chios, one from Filippoupolis and I could understand them all perfectly well. (Dialogue)

Even in the past century, dialectal variation did not engender unintelligibility, mostly because the main differentiating features were phonological rather than grammatical or lexical. This is not, however, to be interpreted as implying that there were very few morphological and lexical dialectal features. On the contrary, there has always been considerable morphological variation in the Greek language, attributable on the one hand to the vastness of the geographical region of the state during the Byzantine era and, consequently, to the evolution of various dialects, and on the other to the diglossic situation that prevailed up till recently.

Language and education

What, then, is the linguistic situation in contemporary Greek society, and what are the educational policies practised? Generally speaking, one might say that there are few linguistic differences in the speech of educated people, and these differences lie mainly in that the standard is spoken with a regional accent, which persists in their speech. However, it is wrong to assume that there is in Greece a high status stan-

dard accent, like the British English RP which is employed mainly by public school graduates.

Dialectal features, either grammatical or lexical and, most notably, phonological or phonetic, which obviously diverge from the standard usage, are considered substandard or rustic forms of the language, and are associated with the peasantry. In general, the educated classes consider the peasantry backward and uncultured, and this evaluation is reflected clearly in their mostly negative opinion of regional speech.

Most teachers in Greece have not become sensitised to an appreciation of dialectal variation, since dialectology does not form any part of the syllabus at university level. On the other hand, although the State never banned the use of linguistic varieties from education by any kind of statutory legislation, standard Greek, i.e. KNE or Modern Greek Common Language, remains the standard language of Education: textbooks in KNE, for example, are uniformly prescribed by the Ministry of Education for all schools in all regions of the country.

It goes without saying, that the contrast between young standard language speakers and dialect speakers is more pronounced in rural areas and in underprivileged areas of big cities. This situation generates educational problems which, however, cannot always be guaranteed a sympathetic understanding on the part of teachers.

According to Baslis (1988), who conducted research in the Basil Bernstein tradition, teachers grade more highly essays by middle class students, who are standard language speakers, than those written by working class and regional schoolchildren. Moreover, their expectations regarding their students' academic potential and prospective careers were shown to be determined to a great extent by their knowledge of the children's social background.

Young dialect speakers enter school with an initial disadvantage, since linguistic norms are tailored for

middle class children and especially for standard language speakers. Fragoudaki (1985, 1987) notes that children from lower classes find themselves in an alien linguistic environment when they are first introduced to school, where they are forced to "translate" language used by the teacher and textbook into their own linguistic system whose structure may very well be different.

Some recent language textbooks introduced both in primary and secondary education constitute a move towards the right approach to language teaching, although a great deal of work still needs to be done in this respect. For example, Greek language classes currently emphasise the development of command of written forms of the standard language to the detriment of the development of oral language production.

Language textbooks, which are supposed to underpin and promote mastery of the language in all its manifestations, are primarily based on written forms of the standard language. Instead, language teaching should initially capitalise on the linguistic knowledge the schoolchildren have already acquired in their home environment.

Although there has been no research in this area that I am aware of, it is reasonable to assume that participation of dialect speakers in verbal interaction in the classroom must be low, especially in classes consisting of children from social backgrounds different from theirs. It need not be mentioned that children are conscious of the fact that their accented speech is stigmatised and they even "admit" that standard speech is aesthetically more pleasing and refined. Moreover, depending on teachers' attitudes, dialect speakers run the risk of being penalised every time they attempt participation in class interaction by being "corrected" in an unpatterned and intuitive way. Dialectal features may even elicit ridicule on the part of their peers. These factors make dialect speaking schoolchildren reluctant to express themselves in class. In conclu-

sion, it seems that the general behaviour of teachers seems to favour standard language speakers since evaluation is based on a scale of values of middle class speech.

Dialect speakers' parents, mostly peasants eager to see their children espouse an urban way of life and ascend the social scale, recognise that ability in standard Greek will enable their children to achieve higher social and professional status. These sentiments may very well lead dialect speakers "to disparage their own language, and children in particular to develop feelings of linguistic insecurity".

Teachers must be positively disposed to linguistic diversity and persuaded that all varieties of Greek are equally "correct". Adoption of both the right attitude and behaviour can only be achieved by familiarising prospective teachers with linguistic varieties, initially through the school curriculum, and at a later stage of their education through the syllabus at University level. Their syllabus at College should include an Introduction to Linguistics, Sociolinguistics and the Sociology of Language. It is worthy of note that the Kingman Report states that all teachers of English "need some explicit knowledge of the forms and the uses of the English language". Teachers must be made aware of the legitimacy of all the conventions of language behaviour particular to the various social groups to which children normally belong. These conventions may relate to different dialects of different accents and even to different languages; and the child needs to acquire them all in order to operate effectively — and not only in school language, which is the language of his/her public world, but also in home and street language (Kingman Report).

Admittedly, of late there has been an increase in the appreciation of linguistic variation and a growing awareness in educational circles that conventional attitudes must change. Apart from the introduction of considerably improved language textbooks, a collection of texts from various dialects

which will accompany textbooks in Secondary Education is in press at the moment.

Moreover, a working team was set up at the Teachers-in-Service Training Centre, consisting of I. Tsolakopoulou, S. Hatzisavvidi, E. Hondolidou and A. Iordanidou, on the initiative of A. Haralambopoulos, Professor of Linguistics, affiliated with the Centre. The team have drafted certain proposals regarding the teaching of Greek, which, they think, should not only focus on all uses of language but should also familiarise schoolchildren with dialectal variation as a source of linguistic richness.

However, it is imperative that in this country, too, a Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of the Greek language be officially appointed by the Secretary of Education, which would investigate the matter thoroughly and make recommendations which the State should undertake to implement.

References

- (Gr) indicates that the language is Greek.
- Baslis, Y.
1988 *Socio-Linguistic differentiation and school achievement*. Athens, Nea Paedia (Gr).
- Chambers, J.K. & Trudgill, P.
1980 *Dialectology*. Cambridge, CUP.
- Ferguson, C.A.
1959 "Diglossia". In P. Giglioli (ed.), *Language and Social Context*. Penguin, 232-251.
- Filiat, B.
1974 *Problems of social transformation*. Athens, Papazisis (Gr).
- Fragoudaki, A.
1985 *Sociology of Education*. Athens, Papazisis (Gr).
- Kingman Report.
1988 Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of English Language, HMSO.
- Lyons, J.
1981 *Language and Linguistics*. Cambridge, CUP.
- Miravel, A.
1959 *La langue grecque moderne description et analyse*. Paris.
- Triandafyllides, M.
1938 *Modern Greek Grammar. Historical Introduction*. Salonika (Gr).